

# News Release

## **U.S. Senators Pete Domenici & Jeff Bingaman**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MAY 16, 2000

### DOMENICI & BINGAMAN REQUEST GAO AUDIT INTO CAUSE OF CERRO GRANDE FIRE

#### **Senators Question Decision-Making That Led to Prescribed Burn**

WASHINGTON -- U.S. Senators Pete Domenici and Jeff Bingaman have requested a formal investigation into the events that led to the devastating Cerro Grande Fire, a prescribed burn intentionally set by the National Park Service that went tragically awry.

In a letter to David Walker, Comptroller General of the General Accounting Office, the lawmakers requested the non-partisan government investigative arm to review the events leading to the fire and outline measures to prevent future fires. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Chairman Frank Murkowski and House Resources Chairman Don Young both joined in requesting the GAO audit.

“The catastrophic wildfire that occurred in and around Los Alamos, New Mexico has had a devastating impact on that community,” Domenici and Bingaman wrote Walker. “Hundreds of families have lost their homes, thousands of people have been evacuated, and over a thousand firefighters have been put in harms way to bring this fire under control. In the end, the damage from this fire may approach \$1 billion.

“All of these impacts are the result of a prescribed fire ignited by the National Park Service in an effort to prevent this type of fire in the future. The catastrophic results of this controlled fire raise questions about how the Service makes decisions on when, and where, to use fire as a management tool,” the lawmakers said.

Thursday, the U.S. Department of the Interior is expected to release a preliminary investigative report on the decision by U.S. Park Service personnel to ignite the controlled burn at Bandelier National Park. Beyond exploring that decision, the lawmakers asked the GAO to review additional areas beyond the scope of the Interior Department investigation, including existing policies and guidelines regarding prescribed burns and actions that can be taken to prevent this type of catastrophic event from happening in the future.

In the short-term, the Senators asked the GAO to determine the facts about the decision-making process that led to the prescribed fire. Specifically, the analysis should include (1) how the decision to initiate the prescribed fire was made; (2) what information was available to the decision-making officials; (3) was the decision to proceed with the prescribed fire consistent with the information available; and (4) whether the actions taken were consistent with the generally accepted practices involved with prescribed fire.

